In *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death*, Liran Razinsky proposes that death appears to be an aporia in the Freudian system due, in large part, to the fact that Freud could not reconcile the issue of death’s representability in the unconscious, or more precisely, the impossibility thereof. In his view, the psychoanalytic ‘approach’ to the issue of mortality would be more accurately described as an *evasion*, a selective inattention originating in Freud’s assertion that death has no place in the unconscious and amounting to what he perceives as the systematic denial, repression or reduction of the psychic significance of death’s singularity in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis.

At the outset, Razinsky’s aim appears to be to offer an intellectual biography of Freud as seen through the prism of death. Indeed, he provides a compelling and detailed evaluation of Freud’s relation to his own finitude as source of conflicting affects, contrasting Freud’s personal obsession with his own mortality as evidenced, for instance, in his correspondence with Fleiss and Ferenczi, with his denial of any correlative to death in the unconscious and his subordination of the fear or anxiety provoked by death to the fear of castration, loss, separation or guilt. Drawing out this disparity, Razinsky’s insinuation is that Freud, unable to reconcile his deep ambivalence to death or broach the issue directly, attempted to overcome or master this inevitable threat theoretically through diversions punctuated by outright dismissal. But the repressed invariably returns, and Razinsky argues that despite Freud’s explicit ‘theoretical rejection’ (Razinsky, 2014, p. 44), his conflicts with death, personal and analytical, are written into his texts, appearing in derivative forms in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and later as a symptomatic ambivalence in his 1915 paper ‘Thoughts for the Times on War and Death’, both of which reflect the tension between the centrality of death in Freud’s thought and his resistance or inability to incorporate the phenomenon into his theory.

Razinsky reads Freud against Freud, supporting his own theoretical position with a psychoanalysis of Freud vis-à-vis the Freudian texts.
He dedicates a great deal of attention to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, revisiting and boldly reinterpreting Freud’s dreams of death (e.g. ‘Non Vixit’, ‘A Castle by the Sea’, ‘Irma’s Injection’), in order to demonstrate, contrary to Freud’s claims, that death does indeed have a place in unconscious life. Death, according to Razinsky’s reading, is the ‘hidden wish’ behind Freud’s dreams. Yet, it cannot make itself manifest except through the imagery of formlessness, such as that which Freud finds in the depths of Irma’s throat, or through an other that acts as mediator, like the dead governor whose position Freud assumes in ‘A Castle by the Sea’, each man a substitute for the other. This would seem to bring us back to Freud’s original conclusion that one’s own demise cannot be represented as such in the unconscious, to his assessment as expressed in ‘Thoughts for the Times’ that ‘[i]t is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators’ (1915, p. 289). By Razinsky’s interpretation, however, the content of the dreams provide evidence that when death is present, it is so as its own absence, as the very boundary of representation that ‘delimits other psychical contents and gives them form’ (Razinsky, 2014, p. 89).

Following Freud, Razinsky identifies in death three layers of irrepresentability: (1) death is a concept with negative content, (2) the idea of death is incompatible with one’s subjectivity and consequently, (3) the act of thinking about death is structurally impossible given that one cannot imagine the world without oneself. While I cannot disagree with Razinsky’s formulation of death as limit of representation, as his work progresses we see that his argument is structured upon a sharp dichotomy. ‘Life and death are mutually exclusive’, he writes; ‘where life is present, death shall not be, and where death is, life is no longer’ (p. 135). Operating under this logic, he views the attempts within psychoanalytic theory to address the element of death in life as a dilution of the concept. And yet, as the absence of individual psyche and subjectivity, death signals the loss of the psychoanalytic point of reference. Although death cannot be theorized as such, it is still remotely accessible to psychoanalytic questioning via its associations and/or as a function or tendency in relation to subjectivity rather than strictly external to it. However, Razinsky’s binary theoretical framework forecloses these interpretations.

Razinsky is critical of Freud and psychoanalytic theory since for not giving a direct account of death, for countering the significance and singularity of this looming yet ungraspable threat by binding it with life in the form of aim, desire or regressive fantasy. For instance, he unilaterally dismisses Freud’s most pronounced attempt to incorporate death – the death-drive – on the basis that the transformation of death into the object of a wish addresses neither the psychic struggle of imagining the world without oneself, nor the anxiety evoked by the tension between the universal certainty of death and its characteristic unknowability. Razinsky
finds fault with Freud’s formulation of the death-drive on the basis that the psychic and subjective dimensions of death are subsumed in an existential naturalism that recasts dying as an internal tendency. Yet, throughout the course of the book, he appears to reiterate the absence of a subjective dimension as one of the fundamental principles of death. Death, it would appear, dissolves the object of psychoanalytic inquiry. Then, I ask, if we exclude the ventures into existentialism considered by Razinsky to be a distortion of the psychic reality of death, how is psychoanalysis to approach death if not as the aim of a drive? Razinsky, in treating death purely as something unknowable, inevitability external to life, denies its relevance for psychoanalysis as the mental representation of absence or negativity as it exists in the individual in the form of a wish or a trace.

After a close reading of Freud’s attitude towards death, Razinsky provides a cross-section of the treatment of death by a comprehensive range of psychoanalytic thinkers and existential psychologists, methodically maintaining this distinction. Despite the scope of his research, however, his assessments tend to converge on the same conclusion: death is consistently diminished, the fear of death or death anxiety reduced to some other fear or anxiety (e.g. castration, annihilation). As revealed in his critique of the death-drive, Razinsky takes issue with the teleological reading of death as the condition towards which life is oriented, extending this criticism to the work of Kohut and Jung. He is also against any ‘metaphoric’ interpretation of death as the disintegration of the unitary self, such as Becker’s reading of death awareness as a form of self-renunciation (1973) or Winnicott’s formulation of the fear of death as the fear of a past breakdown of self (1974).

Razinsky interprets any attempt to theorize death as a lack of sensitivity to the significance of death itself. However, he does not acknowledge how the significance of death translates into the theoretical field precisely in the form of uncertainty, in the inevitable failure to circumscribe the experience or proximity of this negative concept in logos. Actually, given that his argument hinges on the issue of representation, it is curious that he excludes French psychoanalytic perspectives. He briefly mentions Kristeva and Green, suggesting that the French tradition has displayed a better sensitivity to death, but they are conspicuously absent from his work. To pass over these authors is to neglect a theoretical possibility that, in my opinion, would have deeply enriched his argument, namely, that if death is characterized by its irrepresentability, perhaps this relation is bidirectional. In other words, that the encounter with the irrepresentable (i.e. the abject, the negative) invokes in the psyche the conflict or crisis of subjectivity that is, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the most fearful element of death.

The difficulty with the book, therefore, is that the critical nature of Razinsky’s assessments is not congruent with his conclusion. Curiously enough, *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death* concludes precisely where it
began: with a reassertion of Freud’s position regarding death’s inaccessibility to the mind. And yet, throughout the course of the book, Razinsky frames the problem of death as an active refusal rather than a function of the concept as such, a stance which is not compatible with his thesis that death is not representable. Therefore, it would seem that the ‘theoretical disinclination’ (p. 131) Razinsky perceives is not an active denial of death but rather a reflection of a theoretical position in and of itself, in which the issue is not that psychoanalysis resists theorizing death, but rather that death resists theorization, particularly within a purely psychoanalytic edifice.

If, as Blanchot writes in The Infinite Conversation, ‘the centre of thought is that which does not let itself be thought’ (2003[1969], p. 121), then Razinsky’s work suggests that at the centre of Freud’s work, perhaps at the centre of psychoanalysis, is death as the experience that erases or dissolves the object of analytic inquiry. And yet, Razinsky does not explore this possibility, choosing instead to critique the ‘failed’ attempts to theorize this enigmatic centre. To the extent that Razinsky charts the borders and boundaries of the aporia, his work is a success. However, the aporia that Razinsky perceives is not a product of a theoretical rejection or disinclination, but rather evidence that death poses for psychoanalysis a theoretical limit that can only be approached asymptotically and speculatively. Razinsky comes up against this very limit, structurally unable to offer any suggestion as to what might be inside this theoretical vacuum. To his credit, however, he is well aware of the impossibility of this task.

References